

Baird Chairs First of Many Subcommittee Hearings on Strengthening Science Diplomacy Members Examine Visa Process for Foreign Science Students and Scholars (February 7, 2008)

Washington, D.C. - {Washington, D.C. - The United States is often admired and respected for its leadership on science and technology. This leading status presents the perfect opportunity for the U.S. to develop and build relationships with other countries through the world of science that will fuel innovation and keep America competitive.

In an effort to examine the role that the federal government can and should play in fostering international scientific cooperation and collaboration, members of the Subcommittee on Research and Science Education began a series of hearings today on how to strengthen science diplomacy efforts in the United States. Subcommittee Chairman Brian Baird (WA-03) joined members in examining recommendations for improving the current visa process and studying the difficulties that arise when universities try to recruit students and professors from abroad.

"Today's hearing is the first in a series that will study the potential that science holds for building and strengthening our relationship with other countries. What better way to start than by examining and improving upon the current visa process that allows foreign students and scholars to studying in our country," said Congressman Baird, Chairman of the House Subcommittee on Research and Science Education.

"All of us on this Committee recognize that the federal government must protect the American people from those who seek to do us harm. However, it is important that we review how the barriers we have created since 9/11 are impacting legitimate students and scholars who want to come to this country to study and scholars who want to come here for research collaborations or conferences. We must also examine what we are doing, or should be doing, to reduce those barriers."

During today's hearing, Subcommittee members explored the federal government's policies relating to foreign students and scholars studying at educational and research institutions, while investigating the barriers that keep legitimate students from participating in research collaborations or conferences in the U.S.

"While

all of us on this Committee, particularly Chairman Gordon and Dr. Ehlers, are committed to increasing the pipeline of U.S. students in science and engineering fields, we also recognize that this does not necessarily mean that we should turn away the best and brightest from other countries. Many scientists and engineers entering the U.S. on student and scholar visas return home and rise to prominent positions in their own countries and can serve as important advocates for the United States.

"In addition

to improving our standing and reputation in the world, foreign students help fill the talent pools that fuel innovation and keep the U.S. competitive. Foreign students also help broaden and enrich the educational experience of their peers and bring different perspectives to their disciplines and to their American colleagues, often initiating new research directions that may lead to scientific or technological breakthroughs. The best way to encourage that type of partnership is to improve upon our nation's visa system to ensure that foreign students are able to travel to our country and study alongside American students."

Since the Immigration

Act of 1924, foreign students have attended American universities with temporary visas. Heightened security due to the terrorist attacks of September 11th has greatly slowed the process for students and scholars to obtain visas. In particular, the State Department greatly expanded its list of subject areas on its Technology Alert List (TAL). In addition to the standard stages of the visa process, students and scholars whose area of study or research are on the TAL list are required to undergo additional, time-consuming security checks.

This

expanded visa process has significantly decreased the number of foreign students and scholars studying and working in the United States. The decrease was especially felt at research universities where foreign students account for 25% of all science and engineering graduate students. The overall number of students has rebounded since 2004, when the Committee last held a hearing on this issue. However, U.S. universities now face increased competition from other countries in recruiting the top students from around the world.

Educators,

scientists, researchers, businesses and foreign policy leaders agree that foreign scholars and students enhance American science and technology enterprises, because they bring different perspectives to the table. Foreign students also encourage innovation and help America maintain a competitive edge. And many foreign students return to their home countries where they can serve as important advocates for the United States.

The Committee

heard testimony from Mr. Stephen "Tony" Edson, Deputy Assistant

Secretary for Visa Services, Bureau of Consular Affairs, U.S. Department of State; Dr. Harvey Fineberg, President, Institute of Medicine, The National Academies; Dr. Allen Goodman, President and CEO, Institute of International Education; and Ms. Catheryn Cotten, Director, International Office, Duke University.

For more information on this hearing, please visit the Committee's website at www.house.gov/science.

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